



After the battle Brigadier Roberts points out salient features to Gen Montgomery and Gen Gatehouse from his command tank

Roberts

The next day, 2 September, the nearest enemy vehicle was at least 3,000 yards away and we could take no action other than harassing fire by the artillery and occasionally by the tanks. Watching the enemy's movement closely through binoculars it was quite clear that he was pulling out. Most of his vehicles were facing west, a number of vehicles were towing others in a westerly direction and very little fire was directed against us.

In the wider sphere, as soon as it was clear to Gen Montgomery that the German armored attack had been firmly held on the Alam Halfa position, he ordered planning to begin with a view to obtaining the initiative by closing the gap in our minefields. XXX Corps in the north was to be thinned out to provide reserves for an operation to be developed southwards from the New Zealand sector. This operation was finally planned to start on the night 3/4 September and its urgency was apparent when at first light on the 3d September it was clear that the enemy had withdrawn from contact south and west from Alam Halfa, leaving the area they had vacated strewn with vehicles — some derelict and some short of fuel.

Strict instructions were issued that main bodies should not move from the main defended areas. This was in pursuance of the Army Commander's appreciation that units,

and armored units in particular, were neither sufficiently well trained nor mechanically sound enough to undertake a mobile battle. Furthermore, having repulsed the enemy with heavy losses at comparatively slight cost, he was most anxious not to lose the advantage which had been gained by fighting the battle on ground of our own choosing.

Harassing attacks were stepped up both by the RAF and 7th Armd Div in the south. By the afternoon of 3 September, columns of the enemy were reported moving west from the gaps in the minefields.

The attacks south from the New Zealand positions went in as planned on the night 3/4 September and met with fierce and stubborn resistance. Heavy and repeated counterattacks were made by the Germans on the 4th September to repel our attempts to cut them off. Fighting continued for the next two days between our two minefield belts and it was clear that the enemy was prepared to fight hard for this area.

Early on 7 September the battle was called off and fresh defensive positions were organized to the east of the area of fighting near the minefields. For the further plans which Gen Montgomery had for a future offensive, later to be known as the Battle of Alamein, there were definite advantages in containing a strong enemy force in the south. The whole of Eighth Army's energies

were now devoted to preparing for this offensive.

Fortunately, owing to the proximity of our bases, there were no serious logistical problems. Alexandria was only 60 miles away and Cairo a little over 100 miles beyond. Both these two cities had large stores, depots and repair facilities. The Germans on the other hand were at the end of a long line of communication, a situation which we knew only too well ourselves, having twice previously been well away from our bases, and well appreciated all the problems involved in feeding and supplying an army across the Desert. Now, however, right back on our bases the whole situation, from that point of view, seemed very simple. The detailed arrangements in the individual brigades were, however, much as usual; and it might be of interest if I outlined very briefly the method of supply of the Armored Brigade in battle.

Regimental Transport was divided into three Echelons, B, A and AI. Echelon B consisted of vehicles such as store lorries, spare lorries, office lorries, in fact all those vehicles which did not need to go up and down daily in order to supply their units. Echelon A consisted, in the main, of fuel, ammunition and ration lorries. Echelon AI was a very small party consisting of about 8 lorries, including one medical officer's truck, one fitters' truck and 5 or 6 fuel and ammunition lorries, varying in proportion as between petrol and ammunition depending on the type of battle which it was anticipated would be fought. Echelons B and A were brigaded. The former being directed as to its movements by the senior Q Staff Officer of the Brigade from Rear Brigade Headquarters, and the A Echelon commanded by a Brigade Transport Officer, who was at the same time one of the Regimental Transport Officers. This A Echelon, as has already been mentioned, travelled daily between a supply point or refilling point and the individual units.

AI Echelon was under Regimental control, in fact, under the direct control of the Commanding Officer, who kept it with him in battle, anywhere from 2 miles to 200 yards behind his fighting tanks. When re-



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Inspecting an abandoned enemy SP howitzer

plenishment of ammunition was necessary, the tanks would probably withdraw from the fighting line 200 or 300 yards and rearm direct from these lorries, one troop per squadron at a time. Sometimes, if the terrain was suitable it was possible for the lorries to go straight up to the tanks and this, in fact, did happen in a number of instances in the battle of Alam Halfa. However, it will be appreciated that the lorries were completely unarmed and, therefore, quite apart from the danger to personnel, there was a grave danger of losing all the reserve ammunition if the lorries themselves got hit. However, in those days there was no other solution, apart from bringing these "soft" lorries right up into the battle, so that the risk had to be accepted. It might be added, that when lorries in A Echelon had been emptied, it was frequently the case that they would be replaced from A Echelon or sometimes from a pool of ammunition lorries held at Rear Brigade Headquarters.

So much for supply; as to communications, these were entirely by wireless, except when the battle got entirely static; then lines were laid to units and sub-units. In the armored units it was seldom that this

state of affairs lasted for very long. It is important to note that the wireless was used personally most of the time by the officers in command of units or sub-units and even as far as brigade and division. It may be said that at the time of the battle of Alam Halfa, wireless communications were at a very high standard, particularly in the Armored Corps. The control that can be achieved over a large force of tanks and guns was very considerable, and the reaction to orders almost immediate. The personal use of wireless by commanders at all levels was, and still is, a vital factor in the control of armored formations in battle.

Before concluding this story of the Battle of Alam Halfa it might be of interest to tell the story of the "going map." This was a plan largely devised by the Chief of Staff of Eighth Army, Gen de Guingand, to confuse the enemy and induce him to plan his advance over ground which was unsuitable for large-scale movement. "Going Maps" were in general use in Eighth Army and were ordinary maps colored in a certain way to indicate the type of desert insofar as it affected vehicle movement. Many of these had been captured by the enemy and it was therefore planned to "plant" one on the enemy which would indicate that certain areas were good, hard "going," but which were, in fact, very soft sand. In particular an area selected for this treatment was situated south of Alam Halfa; whereas it was, in fact, perfectly feasible to find a suitable route by which to approach Alam Halfa from the south and west, it was also possible, if misled, to get into some very "sticky going." The fake "going" map was planted on the enemy by means of a scout car which was intentionally blown up one night on an enemy mine; the map, stuffed in a haversack, was found to have been removed the fol-

lowing day. During their advance the enemy certainly went through this area of bad going and thereby indubitably increased his fuel consumption, but the extent to which the fake going map was responsible has never been fully established.

I have endeavored to tell the story of this battle in the atmosphere in which it was fought, although it must inevitably be from a somewhat limited point of view. In so doing, I hope that the reader, who will also have the benefit of reading the German account, may be able to judge and criticize the actions of those taking part in the light of the situation pertaining at the time. It is so easy when considering a battle from the comfort of an armchair some years after the event, to forget entirely such important points as morale, level of training, mechanical efficiency, fuel and ammunition supply, air superiority and other factors which play such an enormous part in influencing the conduct of affairs at the time.

In retrospect, I have only one point which I welcome this opportunity of stressing. The view has been expressed fairly widely that Gen Montgomery's success in the Western Desert of Egypt was mainly a result of his superiority over the enemy in men and equipment; a superiority not enjoyed by any of his predecessors. However true this may be of the later stages of the campaign, at Alam Halfa our strength in relation to the enemy was rather worse than it had been earlier in the summer. The speed with which he appreciated the essentials of the situation when he arrived in the Desert, the firm plan he at once introduced and the inflexibility of purpose with which he conducted the battle itself, had such a profound effect on the whole of the Eighth Army that within a few weeks he turned a "brave but baffled" force into a conquering army.

W. L. Roberts

(Ed. Because of the prohibitive expense, it was impossible to reproduce the map in its original multicolors. The various colors indicated above are shown in shades of grey. This reproduction has been reduced by 50 per cent.)

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